

# humanitarian news and analysis

## UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: Ethiopia

### Federal Democratic Republic of ETHIOPIA

#### Humanitarian Country Profile

#### Background

Last update: February 2007

Landlocked [Ethiopia](#) is unique among African countries for having maintained its freedom from colonial rule aside from a five-year Italian occupation.

However, the country has also had a history of civil conflict, notably, the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie (who had ruled since 1930) by a military junta, under Mengistu Haile Mariam, in 1974 and a two-year border war with Eritrea.

Mengistu's 17-year military rule, which was based on a socialist agenda, faced internal resistance and uprisings and external invasion, coupled with wide-scale drought and massive refugee problems.

He was toppled in 1991 by a coalition of rebel forces, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The EPRDF coalition set up a provisional administration under the Tigray People's Liberation Front's leader, Meles Zenawi, who is serving a third term as the country's Prime Minister.

#### Peace and security

The border between Ethiopia and Eritrea has never been precisely demarcated, leading to a border war over disputed territory between the two countries from 1998 to 2000. The war ended in December 2000 after the signing of a peace treaty.

However, relations between the two nations remain hostile as final demarcation of the boundary is on hold due to Ethiopian objections to an international commission's finding requiring it to surrender territory it considers sensitive. Disputes over the border threaten peace, according to the United Nations.

There are also secession movements in the country, particularly the Oromo Liberation Front, which wants a separate state for Oromos, one of the country's largest ethnic groups, in southern Ethiopia. Other political pressure groups include the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front and the Oromo National Liberation Front.

Recently, there has been heightened tension between the government and Somalia's Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which controls most of Somalia, with the UIC accusing Ethiopia of assisting the weak Baidoa-based Transitional Federal Government.

## **IDPs/Refugees**

Ethiopia is home to thousands of refugees, mainly from Sudan - 92,800; Somalia - 12,600, and Eritrea - 10,500, who fled fighting or famine in their own countries.

The UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) provides protection and material assistance, with 14,000 Sudanese refugees expected to participate in voluntary repatriation in 2005.

Repatriation of Ethiopian refugees residing in Sudan is also expected to continue for several years.

Thousands of people have been displaced after heavy flooding in the eastern, northern and southern regions of the country in 2006.

## **Democracy and governance**

Ethiopia's president and chief of state is Girma Woldegiorgis (since 8 October 2001) while the head of government is Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

The country adopted its constitution in 1994 with the first multi-party elections being held in 1995. The last elections in May 2005 were won by the EPRDF, granting Zenawi a third term in office.

While the vote was initially marked by a peaceful, high turnout, demonstrations erupted later as opposition supporters protested against delays and irregularities in the results. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested.

According to Human Rights Watch, the aftermath of Ethiopia's landmark May 2005 parliamentary elections laid bare the deeply entrenched patterns of political repression, human-rights abuse and impunity that characterise the day-to-day reality of governance in much of the country.

## **Media**

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists ([CPJ](#)), the media in Ethiopia is not free, with frequent government crackdowns on the independent press.

After the contested 2005 elections, authorities detained more than a dozen journalists, issued a wanted list of editors and publishers, and threatened to charge journalists with treason, an offence punishable by death in Ethiopia. The media were accused of acting as "mouthpieces" for the opposition.

State-owned media, which include most of Ethiopia's radio and television stations, reflect government policy although the number of private newspapers has grown.

## **Economy**

Ethiopia's economy is based on agriculture, accounting for half the country's gross

domestic product (GDP), 60 percent of exports, and 80 percent of total employment.

However, the agricultural sector has been affected by frequent droughts and poor cultivation; the 2002 drought led to a two percent decline in GDP in 2003.

Coffee is critical to the Ethiopian economy, accounting for US\$156 million in exports in 2002, but low prices have led to many farmers switching to khat, a plant whose leaves are a stimulant, to supplement income.

The country is also a beneficiary of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, and in December 2005 the [International Monetary Fund](#) voted to forgive Ethiopia's debt.

The most recent UN Development Programme Human Development Index ranks Ethiopia 170 out of 177 countries worldwide.

## Population

Ethiopia has a population of 71.3 million people. The population growth rate is 1.8 percent a year according to the World Bank. Fertility rates are high at 5.4 births per woman.

Most Ethiopians belong to the Oromo ethnic group. Others are Amhara, Tigre, Sidamo, Shankella, Somali, Afar and Gurage.

Amharic is the official language of the government with parliamentary documents also being written in English. There are at least 100 other languages spoken, including Oromiya, Tigrinya, Afar, Somali, Arabic, French and Italian. The main religions in Ethiopia are Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox.

## Development indicators

According to the UN Development Programme Human Development Report for 2003, infant mortality was 116 per 1,000 live births in 2001 and 110.4 per 1,000 live births in 2005, according to the [World Bank](#). Maternal mortality was 870 per 100,000 live births between 1985 and 2001.

Life expectancy in Ethiopia in 2001 was 44.6 years for men and 46.7 years for women, compared with life expectancy at birth of 42.5 in 2005. This is lower than the average for least developed countries.

The gross national income (GNI) for 2005 was \$11.1 billion, with a per capita GNI of \$160.00. The present value of debt as a percentage of GNI is 30.4 while the total debt service as a percentage of exports of goods, services and income is 5.3, according to the [World Development Indicators](#) database, April 2006.

The poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line represented 44.2 percent of the population.

## Education

According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates for 2000-2004, 42 percent of all adults, women (34) and (49) men, can read and write. The country has high primary school enrolment rates (93.4) that decline towards the secondary (30.9) and tertiary level (2.5).

The ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary school as a percentage is 77.5. UNICEF estimates that 16 percent of central government expenditure was allocated to education (1993-2004).

## Children

Malnutrition is the leading cause of more than half of all deaths among children younger than five, according to UNICEF. The number of chronically malnourished children has decreased since 1996, but remains alarmingly high.

At least 22 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water while 44 percent has improved sanitation, helping to reduce the number of deaths due to diarrhoea, which currently accounts for 20 percent of under-five mortality.

Immunisation rates for the major vaccine-preventable diseases are about 80-90 percent.

Ethiopia had been polio-free for three years, but 19 cases were reported between December 2004 and October 2005.

The country is home to four million orphans, or 12 per cent of all children. More than half a million of these were orphaned as a result of HIV/AIDS. The school attendance rate among orphans was 60 percent between 1998 and 2004 according to UNICEF.

Ethiopia ranked 20th in 2004 in the under-five mortality rank, the under-five mortality rate for the same year was 166. Other child protection issues include child labour, marriage and genital cutting.

## Health

The health status of the population has been affected by ongoing heavy flooding in the past months. There has been an outbreak of acute watery diarrhoea with 416 deaths and 36,342 cases reported in 99 woredas across the country, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The most affected regions are Amhara, Oromiya, Somali, Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Region, Tigray and one subdivision (Addis Ababa), with 79 percent of cases occurring in Oromiya region. *Vibrio cholerae* has also been confirmed in some of the affected areas.

There has also been a resurgence of polio since December 2004, with 37 cases reported. Four out of 11 regions in the country are affected, with the high-risk areas the

cross-border region of Somali, Ethiopia and north/central areas of Somalia.

The Ministry of Health is continuing to implement control measures, case management and further assessments in cooperation with the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), UNICEF and other NGO partners.

The total health expenditure per capita was \$20 in 2003 while the total health expenditure as a percentage of GDP was 5.9, according to the World Health Report, 2006. The density of physicians per 1,000 people was 0.03 in 2003.

## **HIV/AIDS**

HIV/AIDS continues to spread in Ethiopia, with prevalence higher in the urban areas and growing in the rural areas. The national prevalence rate is 4.4 percent, with approximately 1.5 million people estimated to be living with HIV, about 120,000 of them children, according to UNICEF.

Young people continue to be the most affected, with the prevalence higher among women, particularly young women and adolescent girls.

The factors contributing to the spread of HIV in Ethiopia include illiteracy, stigma and discrimination against those living with HIV, high unemployment, widespread commercial sex work, gender disparity, population movements including rural to urban migration, and harmful cultural and traditional practices.

In January 2005, the government launched a national strategic plan on HIV. The main strategies outlined in the document include: capacity-building; community mobilisation and empowerment; integration with health programmes; leadership and mainstreaming; coordination and networking; targeted response. [UNAIDS](#) is supporting the government and other partners in its implementation and other advocacy efforts.

Sentinel surveillance among women attending four antenatal clinics in Addis Ababa showed that median HIV prevalence was 18.6 percent in 1996, 15.2 percent in 2000 and 15.1 percent in 2002. In 2000, overall HIV prevalence among rural military recruits was 3.8 percent, compared with 7.2 percent among urban recruits.

## **Food security**

In Ethiopia, there is a high level of chronic food insecurity and vulnerability to acute food insecurity, due to drought, environmental degradation, as well as poor access to and availability of food, according to the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)). Ongoing flooding has also affected food security.

With five major droughts in two decades, many families have not had time to recover and hundreds of thousands of people live on the brink of survival every year. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, 46 percent of the total population was malnourished in 2000-2003.

WFP feeds at least six million people in Ethiopia, including 630,000 children, through school feeding, and 100,000 refugees. The numbers of people receiving food aid in Ethiopia varies from month to month and follows agricultural patterns.

### **Gender issues**

Ethiopia ranks near the bottom of UNDP's 2005 Human Development Index. Only 6 per cent of reproductive-age women use modern contraceptives, less than one-third of women have at least one antenatal care visit, and only about 10 percent of births are delivered by skilled attendants, according to the UN Population Fund.

Women and girls are the most affected by HIV/AIDS, having less information and access to services, especially in rural areas. A National Coalition for Women Against HIV/AIDS (made up of women ministers, women parliamentarians and other female leaders) was formed to mobilise communities in the prevention HIV/AIDS. Girls' enrolment in primary and secondary schools has increased under the Education Sector Development Programme.

Although there is no national gender policy, various activities are being carried out to promote gender equality, including community mobilisation to counteract negative gender norms. Financial, technical and human-resource constraints are the main challenges facing the population and development programme.

### **Human rights**

Ethiopia's human-rights record deteriorated after the May 2005 elections when many Ethiopians experienced heavy-handed government efforts to suppress and punish any form of political dissent, according to Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#)).

The aftermath of the May elections was marred by controversy and displays of government brutality that threatened to reverse the gains yielded by the electoral process. These tensions exploded in early June and November when protests broke out in Addis Ababa.

Police and military forces responded with excessive force, killing at least 82 unarmed civilians and arresting thousands of opposition supporters throughout the country.

Authorities in the vast Oromia region have used exaggerated concerns about armed insurgency and 'terrorism' to justify the torture, imprisonment and sustained harassment of their critics and even ordinary citizens, according to HRW. In addition, there are restrictions on press freedom, judicial delay, and arrests of human-rights defenders.

### **Humanitarian needs**

Ethiopia needs assistance in the reconstruction of infrastructure to enable aid access to flood-affected areas, particularly Mustahil and Kelafo woredas.

Aid is also required in healthcare to cope with high incidences of endemic water-borne

diseases, including acute watery diarrhoea, malaria and intestinal parasites.

Lack of security in some areas of the Somali region is also hampering the transportation of food and deliveries by restricting the movement of vehicles, according to WFP.